

CRITICAL REFLECTION AND PASTORAL CREATIVITY: THE PILGRIM WAY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

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ABSTRACT

Critical reflection and pastoral creativity are important orientations for mission. They involve being authentically present to a pastoral situation, appropriating relevant data, understanding with mind and heart, evaluating through purifying foundational beliefs, and formulating pastorally-sensitive and creative responses. It is a process that requires pastoral workers to be contemplatives-in-action as lifelong co-learners, connecting more deeply with God, self, others, and the context. This is in turn integral to synodality and communal discernment, and characterizes the pilgrim way of the people of God.

Introduction

In the previous issue of this journal, we launched a series of articles that would take a fresh look at key orientations and competencies required of pastoral workers in Asia Pacific today, in light of the changing context for mission.¹ This article is part of that series, and focuses on the topic of critical reflection and pastoral creativity. In the present day, the Covid-19 pandemic has plunged the whole world into turbulence, forcing both Church and society to adopt new ways of proceeding, and requiring them to rethink, re-evaluate, and reinvent. Indeed, no other time in recent history has exerted such a huge demand on all peoples, institutions, and communities. One of the critical challenges faced by everyone was the constant need to confront the question of what is truly essential and what is not, and to find ways of adapting to each changing context. This experience, fresh on everyone's mind, is perhaps a good way to introduce the topic of critical reflection and creativity, even though prior to the crisis, these orientations have always been important for the progress of humanity and most certainly for the growth of the Church. The first part of this article will describe these orientations and highlight their significance in pastoral ministry, while also noting the limitations faced particularly among pastoral workers in Asia Pacific. The second section will elaborate on what critical reflection and pastoral creativity entail, and make some suggestions regarding formation. It is hoped that this discussion will encourage more awareness and effort in promoting these important orientations in the Church and beyond.

The Significance of Critical Reflection and Creativity

In pastoral ministry, critical reflection and creativity are about being reflexive, attentive, discerning, dialogical, and transformative in all aspects of ecclesial life and mission. They entail a way of proceeding which includes endeavoring to be more spiritually-centered when addressing a pastoral issue or situation, seeking accurate information and comprehensive views, understanding the issue more deeply, examining it from a variety of perspectives, obtaining and applying relevant knowledge, evaluating in the light of faith and other wisdom

1. See Christina Kheng, "Toward Effective Mission in Asia Pacific Today: Key Orientations for Pastoral Workers and Implications for Formation," *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 1–24.

traditions, and formulating appropriate responses, all in a spirit of attentiveness to God's active guidance. Such a way of proceeding is not merely an isolated exercise but should be part of an ongoing habit of reflecting, discerning, acting, and learning together as a community. It thus characterizes the synodal, pilgrim way of the people of God.

Since awareness and insight ultimately require concrete response – else it would be “all talk and no action” – and concrete action needs to be based on well-grounded, discerned, and principled reasoning, critical reflection and creativity go together as one seamless flow in pastoral ministry, contributing to the progressive transformation of the world towards the kingdom of God. They are orientations demonstrated by the “good and faithful servants” (Matt 25:23) who bear fruit with the talents given by the Master through their diligence, fidelity, prudence, risk-taking, and ingenuity. In fact, critical reflection and creativity are essential for all human persons to fulfil their call to collaborate in the *Missio Dei*, and grow in intellect, wisdom, freedom, and authentic subjectivity. They are also a means to clarify and integrate one's deepest values and beliefs with one's life directions, decisions, and actions.

In pastoral ministry, many situations require the exercise of critical reflection and creativity. For instance, in carrying out the mission of the Church, pastoral workers need to read the signs of times, evaluate them in the light of the Gospel, and take appropriate action for the world's transformation. As highlighted by Vatican II in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the World, *Gaudium et Spes* (hereafter GS),

the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which people ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics (GS 4).

This call to discern and manifest the light of the Gospel is equally vital in acute situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic as well as in longer-term realities that are being formed by underlying trends. Pope John Paul II has highlighted that a competency “that is specially important is that of the evangelical discernment of

the socio-cultural and ecclesial situation in which the particular pastoral action has to be carried out.”²

In association with this, pastoral workers need to design and adapt suitable ministries to the realities of each context, ensuring that pastoral interventions are relevant and effective for various target groups, circumstances, and needs, while also bringing forth the heart of the faith tradition. Such interventions must also make best use of gifts, charisms, and other resources available. Once again, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted this particular aspect of pastoral work, especially with regard to liturgical celebrations.

In ongoing ministries involving preaching, teaching, and catechesis, critical reflection and creativity are very much needed to ensure that these didactical efforts draw appropriately from the religious tradition and other relevant sources, and are applied and communicated properly, relevantly, and insightfully to particular audiences. Closely associated with this is the need to discern a right response to moral, social, spiritual, and other pastoral issues, especially when there are no straightforward answers as is often the case. Pope Francis has observed that

Today, the Church needs to grow in discernment . . . This is put very clearly in the pastoral perspectives and objectives of *Amoris Laetitia*. We are used to a “yes you can or no you can’t” mentality . . . Generally, above all, we who are part of the religious setting of life as priests and bishops often show little ability to discern, we don’t know how to do it for we have been educated with another theology that is more formal. We go as far as “you can or you can’t.”³

On another front, the Pope has emphasized the importance of discernment by all people, especially the youth. He highlights that “without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend.”⁴

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2. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1992), para. 57. Though this document deals with priestly formation, many of its points regarding the areas of formation apply to other pastoral workers as well.
 3. “Where Have Our People Been Creative? Conversations with Jesuits in Chile and Peru, 2018” in *Pope Francis: Fraternal and Spontaneous*, La Civiltà Cattolica Perspectives no. 2, ed. Antonio Spadaro (Hong Kong: UCAN, 2018), 14, 24.
 4. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God, *Christus Vivit* (hereafter CV) (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2019), para 279.

Indeed, with globalization and the pervasiveness of digital media, people have become more prone to being swept along by popular sentiment and deceived by fake or manipulated news. This has partly resulted in, among other things, ideological fundamentalism and social division, especially when people allow themselves to be influenced by over-simplified, sweeping, and extremist rhetoric. The culture arising from new digital media is also one that promotes shorter attention spans, superficiality, and lack of depth and reflection.

At the same time, the world's challenges are becoming more complex, with social, economic, political, ecological, and moral issues intersecting and coalescing into "wicked problems" for which there are no simple nor superficial solutions. Unprecedented advances in technology, including artificial intelligence and bioscience, are also raising fundamental questions of a profound philosophical nature, including what it means to be human. Thus, global challenges in the present times call for even greater critical reflection and creativity. The Church needs to respond by collaborating with others in dialogical, prophetic, and even innovative ways. As Pope Francis has stressed,

pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: "We have always done it this way." I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.⁵

In Asia Pacific, inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue is a particularly important aspect of the Church's task to promote growth towards truth, harmony, and the positive transformation of society. Just as important is dialogue with culture, including communal beliefs, customs, traditions, and ways of thinking, being, relating, and working. Critical reflection and creativity are needed in the ongoing transformation of cultures to be more relevant and life-giving. They are also needed in the integration of faith and culture, including that of indigenous traditions and their spiritualities.

As part of the pilgrim church, pastoral workers are called to evaluate – and even critique where necessary – their own ecclesial or religious communities, and strive to make improvements in a spirit of love, humility, and wisdom.

5. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, *Evangelii Gaudium* (hereafter EG) (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2013), para. 33.

Throughout Israel's history, various persons have exhorted the community to recognize its erroneous ways and turn back to God. This was in fact a central message of Jesus of Nazareth. Growing up within the Jewish tradition, he saw the widening gap between God's revelation and the religious and socio-cultural practices of his milieu, and dedicated his life towards the required renewal. A key issue in many of his interventions was, once again, the question of what was essential and what was not.

In the present time, many ecclesial and religious communities around Asia Pacific are in need of a similar renewal. In particular, there is much more room to grow in terms of spirituality, understanding of the faith, evangelical outreach, genuine fraternity, synodality, and professional integrity. Critical reflection and creativity are important for such renewal as they facilitate a two-fold movement that involves fruitful rediscovery of the religious tradition and life-giving adaptation to present contexts. This occurs through honest discernment, genuine dialogue, and the synergizing of diverse gifts and charisms. From the Council of Jerusalem in first-Century Christianity to the dialogical *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* of Vatican II, the Church has time and again undertaken this two-fold movement through the grace of God's Spirit and the faithful collaboration of pastoral workers.

Finally, on a personal level, critical reflection and creativity help each pastoral worker grow in his or her spiritual life, vocation, and integral human development. Pastoral workers become better aware of themselves, understand their strengths and weaknesses, reflect on their experiences, and learn new ways of being, thinking, relating, and acting, in cooperation with God's grace. Ultimately, authentic critical reflection and creativity are manifestations of God's Spirit inspiring and animating people towards fullness of life, truth, and love.

Current Challenges

In Asia Pacific, there is much room for improvement in critical reflection and creativity among pastoral workers. Admittedly, the lack of these orientations manifests itself in many ways. For instance, it is quite commonly acknowledged that there is a tendency to seek and expect direct and prescriptive answers from authority figures, teachers, experts, existing laws and texts, or even the media. Information is taken at face value, and a binary "yes/no, can/can't" framework is often adopted. Sometimes responses and decisions are based on unverified information, or on knee-jerk reactions, biases, unexamined assumptions, and

superficial understanding. There is, in some cases, an apparent lack of capacity to think further behind the immediate data of the material, or to understand and apply what is being presented.

Like others, we pastoral workers also sometimes fall into the tendency of uncritically adopting popular sentiment in society. This includes complicity with cultural norms and traditions, whether or not these are in line with Gospel values. Within some ecclesial or religious communities, certain long-held attitudes and practices are also perpetuated without question, even those that may not be as life-giving. This has partly caused certain trends to prevail, such as clericalism, gender discrimination, individualism, communal division, lack of solidarity with the poor, and even financial misappropriation and other abuses. When this happens, pastoral workers lose credibility and the prophetic edge in both Church and society.

On another front, a routinized and insular approach to ministry is sometimes observed whereby we pastoral workers remain boxed up within our comfort zones, applying formulaic or stereotypical solutions without adequate attentiveness to the signs of the times or adaptation to contexts and peoples. There is an underlying inertia and unwillingness to change or to learn new things. In fact, there seems to be an increasing tendency to reinforce pre-existing ideological and often extremist views, and a concurrent lack of openness to and acceptance of others. Sometimes pastoral workers also show a lack of self-awareness and a lack of reflexivity about our own pastoral experiences.

Several reasons underpin these tendencies. At one level, pastoral workers are often busy with a multitude of responsibilities and urgent tasks. The endless demands of each day afford only cursory attention to each matter at hand and leave little time, space, and energy for discernment, reflection, and the exploring of ideas. However, at a deeper level, many pastoral workers in Asia Pacific, along with our peers in society, have been raised and formed with a mentality of being told what to think, and of simply accepting and obeying what is told to us. The local culture, education system, and political climate in many places have not fostered critical thinking, creativity, and autonomy. Instead, they have emphasized conformity, obedience, and the following of norms. Individuality and self-expression are frowned upon.

Within ecclesial and religious communities, this is further reinforced by a pre-Vatican II mentality that still dominates many parts of Asia Pacific. Critical reflection, creativity, personal freedom, the expression of one's voice, and even

the raising of questions are seen as signs of rebelliousness, egoism, or lack of faith and piety. Moreover, some religious communities remain relatively closed-up, lagging behind their surrounding society in opening to the “outside world.” A sub-culture of conformity, insularity, complicity, and fear of the unknown thus prevails. As a consequence of all these factors, many of us pastoral workers instinctively tend not to think for ourselves even when freedom of thought or opinion is encouraged. This is exacerbated by a lack of the particular skills required for critical reflection and creativity, since these had been seldom cultivated in formal education, which typically evolved around memorizing given materials and reproducing them in exams. “Formation” has thus become associated with accumulating formal qualifications and attending course after course of trending topics, without genuine understanding, reflection, integration, and transformation.

Adding to these reasons, there are other factors which impede critical reflection and creativity in Asia Pacific. These include inadequate accompaniment for growth in psycho-emotional maturity, and hence the lack of interior freedom, objectivity, self-awareness, humility, and confidence required for exercising critical reflection and creativity. There are also certain cultural traits in Asia Pacific, such as the fear of “losing face,” of appearing ignorant, and of making mistakes, which in turn inhibit risk-taking, experimentation, adaptation, and learning. The capacity for learning, in particular, entails the acceptance of vulnerability.⁶ Those who are averse to or threatened by vulnerability, uncertainty, and complexity thus lack the willingness to discern the best way forward amidst uncertainty and to take decisive action courageously. Procrastination, passivity, passing-the-buck, or even fundamentalism often result. This is further complicated by hierarchical traditions, in which those who are more senior are expected to be all-knowing and always right, whilst others follow in unquestioning silence. Moreover, in many Asia Pacific cultures, there is a tendency to not share one’s views frankly and openly, especially when it involves disagreement or negative feedback.

All these inhibit the conditions needed for critical reflection and creativity, and present challenges to the synodal and pilgrim way of the People of God. In contrast, contemporary society now regards key life-skills to include the ability to deal with ambiguity, to thrive amidst uncertainty, to appreciate diversity and

6. A helpful and brief discussion on adult learning is presented in Erika Andersen, “Learning to Learn,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 2016.

complexity, and to engage in dialogue. Application rather than amassing of knowledge, and the ability to raise questions and recognize knowledge gaps are now more highly valued. The challenges among pastoral workers thus need to be addressed urgently, and at the cultural and systemic level as well as in formation. As an important step, it is helpful to take a closer look at what critical reflection and pastoral creativity entail.

Basic Process and Competencies

A process for critical reflection and creativity can be built upon the basic dynamics of the Pastoral Cycle which comprises the See-Judge-Act method. In addition, renowned philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan has elaborated on a similar process for human insight comprising experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. Important points can also be drawn from the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, especially with regard to communal discernment.

The process described below serves as a general outline and can be used for adaptation to specific pastoral situations. It has been written with more complex and significant pastoral issues in mind in order to provide a thorough description of the process. Other pastoral situations may not require the whole process in its entirety. In each step below, implications and suggestions for formation will also be highlighted.

1. Authentic Presence to the Issue at Hand

The first step in any pastoral endeavor is to become more wholly present and available to the issue at hand, with sincerity, attentiveness, and love. This includes connecting authentically with God, self, and others, and being open to listening, probing deeper, asking questions, and imagining new possibilities and alternatives even in the face of apparently binary, “either-or” choices. What needs to be avoided is the tendency to react impulsively and superficially to events and issues, or allow our default responses to be activated unthinkingly.

Since authentic presence requires the setting aside of space within one’s busy schedule to focus adequately on the issue, pastoral workers need to develop the habit of good self-management. We need to become contemplatives-in-action who can exercise reflexivity and discernment in the midst of daily tasks, and redirect our attention, time, and activities as guided by God’s Spirit. Such a disposition is promoted especially by the tradition of Ignatian spirituality and

can be cultivated in various ways such as through the Ignatian daily *examen*. Additionally, the mindfulness movement also helps to facilitate interior stillness, attentiveness, and presence, especially through the regular practice of various forms of meditation and centering. Above all, pastoral workers can look to Jesus in the gospels, who was always fully, attentively, and lovingly present to each person and situation. Hence a question which we pastoral workers can ask ourselves is: Are we able to be genuinely attentive in our ministry? What needs to change in our daily life or habitual way of proceeding in order for us to be more authentically present to the persons and issues before us?

An important aspect of authentic presence is the need to go into prayer to seek the grace of interior freedom, especially freedom from personal attachments and blind-sidedness. It is often necessary for pastoral workers to be aware of our own feelings or biases towards the issue, however subtle these might be. Moreover, if there are strong emotions involved, this can greatly obstruct logical reasoning and constructive dialogue. More time and space would then be needed for prayer, centering, and the regaining of some inner peace and calm.

Sometimes a “pedagogy of provocation” is needed to awaken pastoral workers to our own role in certain situations or problems, be it clericalism, communal division, or evangelical inertia, especially when we have been embedded within the community or institution and are unable to see the areas that need change. Provocations can come in various forms and through various people. The Bible contains many interesting examples, such as Prophet Nathan’s intervention to make King David realize his own wrong-doing through a story about an unjust rich man (2 Sam 12:1-13). Another pedagogy of provocation can be seen in the South African Lumko Institute’s study group materials, which employ pictorial narratives that can effectively provoke group members’ awareness about their socio-pastoral realities and encourage honest discussion. Yet another pedagogy of provocation involves removing oneself temporarily from a familiar environment so as to see it from new perspectives. Exposure to new contexts also help in engendering such awakenings.

As mentioned earlier, growth in self-awareness and psycho-emotional maturity is indispensable for critical reflection and creativity. The more that we pastoral workers are able to live and minister from our true selves with interior freedom, the better we can acknowledge our own behaviors and affectivities, and be open to change where needed with the grace of God. We would also be more well-disposed to dialogue with others, consider a variety of alternatives, and

choose what best aligns with the greater good. To this end, we need to grow especially in spiritual maturity. This includes cultivating our ability to recognize God's presence and active labor in all situations, and our desire to be one with God and do God's will. This can be a grace to seek in the preparatory prayer.

With a more authentic presence, an initial delineation of the issue at hand can be done. This includes identifying what the issue is all about, what questions or problems need to be addressed, who the stakeholders are, what information is needed, what decisions need to be made, if any, and what time and resources are available. In addition, rather than attempt to address the issue alone, pastoral workers should also identify and connect with potential collaborators. An important disposition at this stage is the ability to remain with ambiguity. This includes being open to having more questions than answers, being patient with the process, appreciating the rich complexity of reality, and resisting the temptation to over-simplify especially by applying binary judgements or solutions. It implies staying with the question and perhaps even "pondering" like Mary (Luke 2:19), with wonder, intrigue, and loving trust. Once again, this underscores the importance of being centered and authentically present, so that one is more ready for the pilgrim journey of deep learning.

2. Appropriation of Relevant Data

The next step is to gather data on the issue at hand. This usually includes quantitative and qualitative data, such as specific and immediate facts about the matter, background information on the situation, its historical development, the persons involved, and relevant social, cultural, political, legal, religious, ecological, and other contextual details. Critical reflection and creativity in pastoral ministry are not based on false or inadequate information nor on unexamined and untested assumptions. Groundedness in the context is also key. As Cardinal Orlando Quevedo rightly points out,

Attention to *context* assures the rootedness of discernment in concrete realities, the relevance of faith reflection not separated from context, and the importance of decisions that effectively address the situation. In a word, this is theologizing from below, not theological deduction from general principles.⁷

7. Cardinal Orlando B. Quevedo, "Ten Theological Trends for Mission in Asia: Fifty Years after Vatican II," edited by Father James Kroeger and published in this issue of *APMS*.

Sometimes relevant laws, rules, or policies may need to be looked up and clarified. Expert advice might also be required, along with relevant knowledge from various domains such as the social sciences, humanities, arts and culture, business, medical, and natural and physical sciences.

Above all, the stakeholders need to be consulted, especially those most affected. The “data” of experience, whether of the pastoral worker or others, is important material for critical reflection. Particular attention should be paid to voices from the margins and the most vulnerable. In this regard, effective consultation entails being welcoming of the “other,” especially those who have different perspectives. This is all the more important in the present times when polarization of opinions and positions seems to be growing. Pastoral workers need to adopt a dialogical approach that is pro-active in seeking diverse sources of information, obtaining a “360-degree” perspective where possible, and striving to counter our own biases, prejudices, and blind-spots with the help of others.

Consultation in the spirit of discernment implies attending wholeheartedly to each person, listening deeply with empathy, and paying attention to what is communicated both explicitly and implicitly. Highlighting the importance of attending especially to implicit communication, Martin Linsky and Ron Heifetz offer the helpful phrase of “listen to the song beneath the words.”⁸ In fact, genuine listening calls for a readiness to take off one’s shoes, figuratively speaking, to step into the shoes of the other, to see from his or her perspective, and be moved accordingly. A similar attitude of openness, humility, and perceptiveness is required even in approaching quantitative data.

In some cases, long-term accompaniment of the people and immersion in the context are critical for knowing the required information and insight, though it must be borne in mind that this also has a downside in terms of engendering insularity, blind-sidedness, and biases. To counter this problem, greater effort can be made to gather diverse viewpoints especially from more objective sources.

As can be seen, effective information gathering is itself a discipline that is cultivated over time, requiring a disposition of sincerity, patience, genuine concern, and humility. It also entails eagerness for learning and dialogue, dedication to the truth, and willingness to look out of the box. All these dispositions resonate with the theological characteristics of the pilgrim People of God, who recognize their own limitations and their need for growth in

8. Martin Linsky and Ron Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 64.

knowledge and understanding over time. In the context of Asia Pacific, it can be noted that several challenges inhibit effective information gathering. For instance, countries or regions that are less developed tend to lack proper information and communication systems, as well as sources of relevant expertise. However, a wider challenge is that many pastoral workers have not been exposed to nor gained adequate learning in basic socio-pastoral research. We sometimes lack even the competency of knowing what data is required for each pastoral issue and where to obtain them. Moreover, in the present digital age where reliability of information varies greatly, we face the additional challenge of verifying the information obtained. Skills and attitudes in effective consultation also tend to be lacking, due to entrenched styles of working in a top-down or isolated way. This is further inhibited by cultural norms as mentioned earlier, whereby people avoid being candid or direct in expressing their viewpoints, especially to those in authority. Yet another challenge is that the political regimes in certain places withhold, suppress, or manipulate information.

Among these challenges, those which pertain to lack of competency can be addressed through ongoing formation, exposure, and guided hands-on practice. In addition, pastoral workers who have had a chance to do higher studies involving a thesis would have undergone more comprehensive training in research. They can be encouraged to pass on their skills to others. To overcome systemic or political barriers, pastoral workers can learn to be more astute, tapping on a diversity of people and platforms, and cultivating networks to obtain, share, and verify information. As for deeper-seated cultural barriers to information gathering, we need to change our mindsets and learn to work in a more synodal and collaborative way. We can be more sensitive to one another, especially those who are different or marginalized, and welcome God's presence and communication through each person and the whole community. The present Covid crisis presents a golden opportunity for proceeding in these new ways. It is an uncharted experience for humanity as a whole, creating an unknown future as events unfold dynamically and unpredictably. Hence all the more it requires attentive listening, openness to new perspectives, humility, resourcefulness, and collaboration.

3. Interpretation, Analysis, and Pastoral Understanding

When sufficient and reliable information is obtained, the next step is to ensure that it is interpreted correctly. Our interpretation of factual information or opinions

and viewpoints might need to be confirmed with their original sources. We might also need to consult third parties or seek the help of experts in the case of interpreting laws, policies, statistics, and other information of a more complex or technical nature. Thereafter, we need to meaningfully assimilate the information, such as by noting the main points of a text or verbal feedback, making sense of the data, and if helpful, summarizing the pertinent points in our own words.

In this regard, as noted above, many pastoral workers in Asia Pacific have been educated through a rote-learning system even in pastoral formation. The emphasis has been on quantity and coverage of formal content, to be memorized and reproduced in exams. There has been less attention paid to the facilitation of effective understanding and sense-making. Many of us continue this default way of “learning” when we attend ongoing formation courses. Among other things, it manifests itself in a preoccupation with taking notes *verbatim* from presentations, an inability to summarize the content in our own words and to make connections among different topics or draw inferences to what was not explicitly taught, and a neglect to question assumptions or to consider alternatives. Nevertheless, in some international formation institutes, experience has shown that exposure to new pedagogies can help pastoral workers, whatever their age, to develop new capacities for understanding and effective learning. To this end, relevant insights from the educational sciences can be tapped on. For instance, the taxonomy proposed by Benjamin Bloom (1913–1999) and developed further by other scholars sheds light on the progressive levels through which knowledge is appropriated, beginning from remembering to understanding, analyzing, evaluating, applying, and ultimately, creating. The work of Malcolm Knowles (1913–1997) on andragogy and adult learning is also pertinent. Similarly, David Kolb (1939–) has outlined a “Learning Cycle,” comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, and a “Learning Style Inventory” that can facilitate effective learning.⁹

9. See Lorin W. Anderson, David R. Krathwohl, et al., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2000); Malcolm Knowles, E. Holton, and R. Swanson, R., *The Adult Learner* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2005); David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2015); Kay Peterson and David A. Kolb, *How You Learn Is How You Live: Using Nine Ways of Learning to Transform Your Life* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2017).

With the adequate knowledge appropriated, an analysis then needs to be carried out in order to gain more comprehensive insight on the issue at hand and where relevant, on the various options being considered in response. Such analysis can include identifying implications, recognizing systemic connections, uncovering root causes and deeper issues, examining underlying worldviews and assumptions, or imagining future possibilities and consequences. Depending on the topic, various tools of analysis can be used.¹⁰ Sometimes additional information needs to be gathered, and the process is an iterative one.

As mentioned above, perspectives from various domains can be brought to bear, such as the medical and natural sciences, sociology, philosophy, and various religions and indigenous cultures. Most of all, the analysis should lead to a better understanding of the relevant people and their situation, especially those most affected by the issue. This includes seeking deeper awareness about their particular circumstances, their needs and concerns, their underlying difficulties, their strengths and limitations, and their hopes and aspirations. Such understanding not only helps pastoral workers be more empathetic but also prevents superficial, rigid, or short-sighted application of ecclesial rules and pastoral solutions without regard for people's contextual realities. In this light, analysis is a process which engages both head and heart.

Just as important, pastoral workers need to exercise spiritual discernment in tandem with critical thinking and empathetic understanding. In the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, this entails paying attention to movements of the spirits, which are the interior influences of opposing spiritual forces. In conjunction with the insights and understandings derived during the process of analysis, one may feel consolations such as inner peace, joy, energy, genuine contentment, patience in suffering, and desire for self-giving, or desolations which are the opposite feelings. Spiritual movements can be manifestations of either God's ever-present Holy Spirit influencing us towards God's will, or the evil spirit doing otherwise.¹¹

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10. These include Problem Tree Analysis which traces root causes and consequences, Stakeholder Mapping which identifies the affected or concerned parties, their interests, and their inter-relations, SWOT (strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) Analysis, Scenario Analysis, Cost-Benefit Analysis, and Systems Mapping. For details, see "More Resources on Data Gathering," Essential Ignatian Resources website, <https://sites.google.com/view/dpa-essential-ignatian-resour/home/discernment-in-common/data-gathering/more-resources-on-data-gathering>.
 11. For some references on spiritual discernment, see "IgnatianSpirituality.com," Loyola Press, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits> (accessed June 9, 2020).

Greater awareness and discernment of spiritual movements thus enables pastoral workers to better recognize God's presence and action in the situation at hand, and follow God's lead. It is a capacity that is cultivated over time.

4. Evaluating by Re-appropriating Our Foundations

Insights from analysis of the data then need to be brought into dialogue with one's wisdom tradition. For Catholics, the teachings of the Church serve as a foundational source of wisdom, truth, and values. Pastoral workers need to be familiar with and updated on the Church's teachings, and know which aspects of the faith tradition are particularly relevant to the issue at hand. We also need to know the right approaches to the various sources of religious teaching, and interpret them with the appropriate methodologies. In particular, we need to avoid taking documents of church teachings at face value and expecting prescriptive answers for every problem. Instead, we have to be aware of the developmental nature of doctrine and appreciate the contexts and deliberations out of which a teaching developed, and the changes it might have undergone. This can help elucidate its underlying meaning, intent, and desired end, as well as its relative importance and relevance. Where appropriate, the underlying principles can then be brought to bear on the pastoral issue at hand. To this end, a comprehensive approach to interpreting Scripture and the magisterial documents of the Church is the triple-hermeneutical method of "the three worlds of the text."¹²

Nevertheless, more often than not, there would be conflicting viewpoints, even among religious sources. However, it is in this place of tension that we find the rich potentiality and heart of critical reflection and pastoral creativity. This is because the tension invites us to clarify, purify, and deepen our foundational beliefs regarding what is ultimately true and good. It is here that the human person exercises the highest divine gift of authentic subjectivity, freedom, and responsibility. This calls for no less than an in-depth reflection and fundamental decision on what best aligns with ultimate reality and value. As explained by Lonergan, "foundations . . . is a decision about whom and what you are for and, again, whom and what you are against. It is a decision illuminated by the manifold possibilities exhibited in dialectic. It is a fully conscious decision about one's

12. For a summary of this method, see Archdiocese of Brisbane, Religious Education, "Three Worlds of the Text," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oldTXzkC30&t=337s> (accessed June 9, 2020). See also Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

horizon, one's outlook, one's world-view."¹³ Our foundational beliefs are the basic framework "in which doctrines have their meaning, in which systematics reconciles, in which communications are effective."¹⁴

More than just an intellectual exercise, confronting our foundational beliefs is a process in which human reasoning is engaged together with one's innermost sense of truth, goodness, value, and beauty, within the context of communal dialogue and discernment. C. Otto Scharmer uses the term "presencing" to describe the most important stage at the heart of dialogue, in which one exercises "the capacity to connect to the deepest sources of self – to go to the inner place of stillness where knowing comes to surface."¹⁵ As well-highlighted by GS 14, "human beings plunge into the depths of reality whenever they enter into their own heart; God, who probes the heart, awaits them there; there they discern their proper destiny beneath the eyes of God." GS 16 further elaborates that

In the depths of their conscience, humans detect a law which they do not impose upon themselves, but which holds them to obedience. Always summoning them to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to their heart: do this, shun that ... Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of human persons. There they are alone with God, whose voice echoes in their depths.

More recently, Pope Francis points out that

Discernment, even though it includes reason and prudence, goes beyond them, for it seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us. Here we see the importance of the formation of conscience, which allows discernment to grow in depth and in fidelity to God. Forming our conscience is the work of a lifetime, in which we learn to cultivate the very sentiments of Jesus Christ, adopting the criteria behind his choices and the intentions behind his actions (*Christus Vivit* 280–81).

For all human persons, the opportunity to reflect on and purify foundational beliefs can lead them into the core of their identity, values, and

13. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 267–68.

14. *Ibid.*, 268.

15. "Theory U," Presencing Institute, <https://www.presencing.org/aboutus/theory-u> (accessed June 9, 2020).

worldview, and potentially to discover God, the divine origin of all truth, goodness, beauty, and value. This can in turn facilitate the development of common values and a wider appreciation for universal truths. It is thus a much-needed antidote to the present culture of superficiality, prejudice, and polarization in society. The clarification and articulation of common core values also provide humanity with a compass with which to formulate and assesses both immediate and long-term responses to new challenges such as the Covid-19 crisis.

As pastoral workers, we ourselves need to review our own beliefs, worldviews, and deepest values, and to purify them. Admittedly, the process can feel threatening because it may require re-examining some long-held beliefs and values. However, to avoid this process altogether would be tantamount to idolizing our own positions and ideologies, instead of letting God's Spirit purify our understanding and stretch our horizons.

To assist this endeavor, the Church accompanies its doctrinal heritage with the recognition of a "hierarchy of truths."¹⁶ For instance, church teachings are unequivocal in stressing the merciful and compassionate love of God for each person and all creation as the central feature of the Good News, over and above each particular ecclesial or civil law. As reiterated by Pope Francis, "before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others" (EG 39). The hierarchy of truth can often come to light when we recall the story of the Church or even of our local ecclesial community. We can then gain a better appreciation of what is essential and what is not. Pope Francis highlights that "Christianity is not only a doctrine, but a history that leads to this doctrine." He cautions against being "ideological Christians" who "lack the memory of belonging to a people" – the People of God with a history of salvation and revelation.¹⁷

Once again, spiritual discernment is just as important in this step. Throughout the process of appropriating the relevant church teachings, applying them to the issue at hand, examining ultimate truth and values, and identifying their implications, there needs to be attentiveness to the influences of the spirits and a desire for God's will. New ways of seeing may then emerge. This sometimes

16. Vatican II Council, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1964), para. 11.

17. Homily at Casa Santa Marta, May 7, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope-francis/mass-casa-santa-marta/2020-05/pope-francis-mass-santa-marta-homily.html> (accessed June 9, 2020).

leads to a realization of the need to question existing norms, or to challenge current beliefs and practices that are no longer life-giving or relevant, including those in one's own ecclesial, religious, or socio-cultural community.

In summary, the heart of critical reflection and creativity lies in this crucial step of confronting and purifying foundational principles so as to evaluate the issue at hand more authentically, and pave the way for arriving at a conclusion. The way in which we carry out this step plays a significant role in our growth as the pilgrim people of God.

5. Formulating and Implementing Conclusions and Decisions

Eventually a conclusion or decision needs to be made. Realistically, the information, analysis, and evaluation are often not as complete and perfect as we would like. What is important is the collective sense of confirmation in the communal discernment. This often comes in the form of consolations such as a deep sense of affirmation, peace, energy, and willingness to follow-through despite anticipated difficulties. Hence the fruit of discernment is not only a sound conclusion or decision on the matter at hand but also increased confidence, commitment, courage, and creativity. On this note, it is helpful to know and adopt appropriate methods of communal dialogue, such as the Spiritual Conversation in the Ignatian tradition. This entails getting all participants in the communal discernment to first spend time personally praying with and reflecting on the information and issue at hand, with guiding questions. This is followed by a communal gathering, during which members take turns to share the fruits of their prayer and reflection, listening to one another wholeheartedly, and paying attention to the interior movements within oneself and in others, so as to discern the spiritual movements in the group and the promptings of God's Spirit.¹⁸ In this regard, it is important to bear in mind that synodality involves the whole community journeying together as co-discerners. It is not simply a pastoral worker consulting others for their views, and then making the decision by himself or herself. Even if ecclesial laws hold a pastoral leader accountable for the final decision, such a decision should be rooted in communal discernment, especially when the issue at hand is a significant one or concerns the whole community.

18. For more details on this method, see "Discernment and Planning," Essential Ignatian Resources website, <https://www.ignatianresources.org/home/discernment-in-common/discussion-and-provisional-decision> (accessed June 9, 2020).

Based on the conclusion or decision, the next step is to formulate specific goals, actions, advice, and communications where needed. This often requires pastoral sensitivity so that the formulated actions are well-suited to the people involved. It also calls for strategic thinking so that the chosen options are effective, impactful, sustainable, and consonant with available resources and personnel. In addition, pastoral creativity is just as important. This includes thinking out of the box and boldly exploring new ideas where needed. Much of this occurs through a necessary trial-and-error and experimental approach, sometimes with failures and mistakes along the way. However, what is important is the commitment towards ongoing learning, discernment, dialogue, collaboration, and faithfulness in follow-through.

Conclusion

The process of critical reflection and pastoral creativity as described above contain many elements that help us develop the new way of being Church, especially as a synodal and pilgrim people of God. Although the process needs to be adjusted for each type of pastoral endeavor, the underlying principles of each step can be applied to all pastoral ministry in general. For instance, even the preparation of a homily would require authentic presence and prayer, adequate research, intimate knowledge of the people, understanding with both head and heart, confrontation with ultimate truth, personal transformation, making conclusions about key insights, and formulating an appropriate message. A more complex project such as pastoral planning in a diocese or parish would entail a more elaborate process with greater communal participation and discernment. Beyond the Church, pastoral workers can also encourage others in secular society, such as in schools, grassroots communities, and socio-political networks to adopt this process. More than just an intellectual exercise, it engages all faculties of the human person, including the physical senses, the intellect, affectivity, interiority, relationality, and spiritual sensitivities, and helps people to develop themselves holistically. More importantly, it promotes the clarification of common foundational truths and values, and facilitates better universal action for the common good. This is certainly much needed in the present challenging times.

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